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DEATH-MASKS IN ANCIENT AMERICAN POTTERY

F. S. DELLENBAUGH

In depicting the human face, the natives of North America have not been successful. Particularly is this the case in what is called the Atlantic group—that is, those tribes east of the Rocky mountains. In Mexico some of the ancient people had achieved a fairly high mark in the direction of art, and this skill seems to have filtered in varying degree along the Pacific coast as far as the northern limit of the present Haida Indians; yet even in Mexico the human face was not treated broadly and dexterously, but was customarily drawn or modeled as elsewhere—more or less weakly, without ears, in profile. The ear was not shown or was hidden by some kind of ornament. Much of the work of the Pacific group commands respect from an art point of view, and sometimes admiration; but throughout the Atlantic group, excepting the graceful forms of the mound-builder pottery, it may be said there was little art development. Some of the moundbuilder pipes are interesting, and exhibit a moderate degree of dexterity in modeling objects familiar to them, but they seldom endow the object with its rightful beauty or express it with accuracy or artistic force.

When we come to the human head and face, the attempts to reproduce it are generally, from an art standpoint, merely ludicrous. What, then, are we to conclude when suddenly we come upon a group of funeral jars from Arkansas bearing some truly remarkable and accurate human faces? We may select for examination the best of these image vases, so far as I know them—the one so accurately engraved for Mr Holmes' article in the Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, and numbered figure 420, page 407. Are we now to follow a time-hallowed custom and deduce from the extraordinary excellence some equally extraordinary theory? Say, perhaps, that while out sailing some pupil of Phidias was blown out of his course by an easterly gale and, scudding past the Pillars of Hercules, landed on the Atlantic coast of North America, whence immediately he proceeded inland to Arkansas for the express purpose of teaching sculpture and executing these strangely perfect vases;

or shall we rather say a tribe of Aztecs came up to Arkansas and then went home again? Hardly. Better let us accept the easiest, most probable solution, and admit that ordinary redmen, who lived for ages in the region, are responsible for these unusual vases, and we will then try to explain how it came about that a few should have been able to acquire such great and rare skill; for the free-hand skill that could produce the vase under discussion must assuredly be nothing less than great and rare.



FIG. 1.—Head-shape vase from Pecan Point, Arkansas ($\frac{1}{2}$).

Here we look on a face perfect in its proportions, accurately modeled, and, above all, depicting death with a master-hand; yes, more, presenting to the spectator death itself as it seized this personage in the long-forgotten past. Here is death present with us as plainly as it is in the well-preserved features of an Egyptian mummy. He is certainly a great artist who can do this. How did our untutored redman achieve this wonderful result? How perpetuate the awful silence of a mouth the fleeting spirit left ajar? How eternalize the eyelids a short time

before closed to light forever, now striving to open to eternal darkness? With marvelous fidelity this jar represents these things; presents them with a genius that, notwithstanding the centuries gone, enables us to sight the shadow of the Death Angel's wings!

Now, is it likely that the redskin artist who never succeeded in modeling any other object accurately should so wonderfully triumph with the most difficult object in all nature, the human face? I think not. What, then, is the explanation? To me it seems perfectly simple. A process of some kind must have been used; probably the process known and used for ages by sculptors. Clearly the face on this jar is a death-mask. Soft clay was pressed upon the dead features, and when sufficiently dry it was removed and other soft clay thinly pressed into the mold obtained. The mask thus made was built upon till the jar before us was completed. In this conclusion there is nothing improbable. Some accident revealed the method to the red artist, and it was utilized in making these urns for burial with the remains of distinguished individuals. In no other way, it seems to me, can this vase be satisfactorily explained. Mr Holmes describes the vase as follows:

The finest example yet found is shown in figure 420. In form it is a simple head, five inches in height and five wide from ear to ear. The aperture of the vase is in the crown and is surrounded by a low, upright rim, slightly recurved. The cavity is roughly finished, and follows pretty closely the contour of the exterior surface, excepting in projecting features such as the ears, lips, and nose. The walls are generally from $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch in thickness, the base being about $\frac{3}{8}$. The bottom is flat, and takes the level of the chin and jaws. . . . The face cannot be said to have a single feature strongly characteristic of Indian physiognomy. We have instead the rounded forehead and projecting mouth of the African. The nose, however, is small and the nostrils are narrow. The face would seem to be that of a youngish person, perhaps a female. The features are all well modeled, and are so decidedly individual in character that the artist must have had in his mind a pretty definite conception of the face to be produce as well as of the expression appropriate to it, before beginning his work. It will be impossible, however, to prove that the portrait of a particular personage was intended. The closed eyes, the rather sunken nose, and the parted lips were certainly intended to give the effect of death. The ears are large, correctly placed, and well modeled.

In this Mr Holmes assumes, apparently, that the artist of this remarkable vessel modeled it free-hand without the object before

him—in other words, that it is purely ideal. I am of opinion this would have been an impossibility. The redman never lived and I believe never will live who could impress such individuality on clay, either from his imagination or from the model. Such conception and execution would be remarkable even in an artist descended from an esthetic race, and there is no evidence that an esthetic race existed on this continent in any precolumbian time. I believe this vase and similar work have been regarded by some as evidence of the former occupancy of this land by a race different from the redmen, but its very accuracy is evidence against such a theory. A race so different from the redman as to be capable of producing a face like this would have left other and abundant testimony of their skill. They would, in all probability, have left hands and feet; arms, legs, and torsos, as well; for without constant practice in these things how could they have attained this perfection? Art is certainly a growth in any land, not an explosion.

There is only one way, then, in my opinion, that this vase and its companions could have been produced by any being who ever occupied the territory where it was found, and that is by the method I have described. The cut of figure 420, herewith reproduced in our figure 1, is half size. I can discover no special resemblance to African features. An eminent artist to whom I showed the cut, and who did not know the connection, thought the features resembled those of the Chinese. All that I can see in them is a young redskin, somewhat distorted by disease and death. The age might be anywhere from ten to sixteen, if a male, and fourteen to twenty, if a female. The nose seems to be one that might become strongly aquiline. The face is not, after all, as small as the size of the jar at first glance would seem to establish, and this discovers a discrepancy in scale between it and the remainder of the vessel, proving that when the potter left the guidance of his mold or cast he was lost, and rounded up the vase too soon and too small to accord with the features. Not all the potters were entirely successful with their molds, as some faces show by considerable distortion, due doubtless to clumsiness and lack of care in the handling.

For the purpose of comparing the chief portions of Mr Holmes' figure 420 with some standard, I measured the features of two white boys representing the average at about ten years, and also

an adult white man and woman and placed the measurements beside those of the vase (the vase measurements were made from the engraving). The accompanying plan (figure 2) shows that as between the white boys (whose measurements were identical) and the vase there are no great differences. The forehead of the white boy is one-half inch higher, but a redskin lad of about the same age might easily have this difference, while the potter also may not have extended his cast to the hair-line exactly, or he may have found it desirable to trim down the rough edges of the mold along the top, on account of its sticking to the hair, before removing it from the face. The white boy is one-half inch wider across the eyes. The nose is the same to the base from the eye-brow line. The upper lip is the same. The chin on the vase is one-fourth inch longer, but as an allowance of about that amount

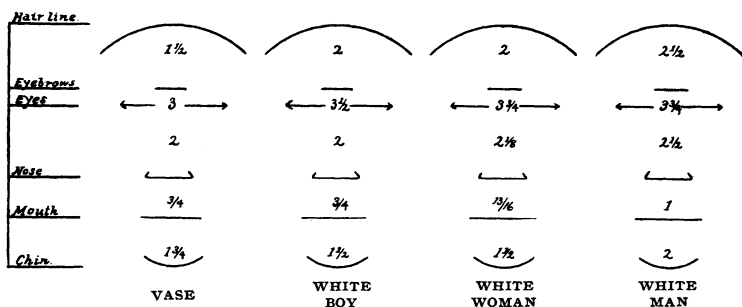


FIG. 2—Comparative measurements of vase and human heads.

must be made for the open position of the mouth, the measurement is practically the same. This gives a very close resemblance between them, and leads to the inference that the face on the vase is that of a lad of about sixteen.

The ears have several perforations in each, which Mr Holmes thinks reveal a custom of the tribe. With this I must differ, for the reason that at the top of the face is a perforated knob, which must have been made for suspension by a cord. In that case two other cords were necessary to hold the vase in balance, and these two cords would be obliged to come down at the back and on each side of the head for attachment. The only available projections for such an attachment are the ears, and the perforations, it seems to me, were for that purpose. The ears being thin, the cords were probably woven in and out, for strength, through the

several perforations. On the other hand, ^{the} knob, being thick and strong, needed but one hole for the cord attachment. The ears, being of good shape and correctly placed, were probably cast along with the face, anatomical correctness not being within the redman's grasp except by mechanical process of some kind. The engraved devices were executed, says Mr Holmes, after the clay had become hard. The reason for this was that on account of the molding process it could not be done before. The vessel would require drying before the mold could safely be removed. The interior of the wall follows the exterior closely except in projecting features. The potter, finding it difficult, as well as unnecessary, to work the clay evenly into the projections of the mold, filled them up more or less solidly. This would also make the features more durable and guard against openings being left to make the jar useless for its purpose. The nose, eyes, and mouth projections, then, would require to be well covered over to prevent leakage. Hence a reason why the wall inside does not follow the exterior surface of the projecting features. Altogether, therefore, it seems that this human face must have been reproduced from death by some mechanical process; in all probability the one that I have described. The face must be a death-mask; it can be nothing else.

PEABODY MUSEUM.—At the beginning of the year the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology was transferred to the corporation of Harvard University. The Museum will henceforth be conducted by the faculty in place of a board of trustees. The faculty consists of President Eliot, Professor F. W. Putnam, and Messrs C. P. Bowditch, F. C. Lowell, and Stephen Salisbury. Professor Putnam remains the curator, as before. For some years there has been a division of American archeology and ethnology in Harvard. Professor Putnam has always been chairman, and instruction has been given in the Museum.

PROFESSOR EDWARD S. MORSE lectured before the Archeological Association of the University of Pennsylvania on January 15, his subject being Japanese Archeology. The lecture was largely attended.